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Fiona Probyn-Rapsey
University of Sydney (USYD)

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Abstract

Some of the white men in country towns who would specially discriminate against Aborigines by day, under the cover of darkness would slip out to the Aboriginal Reserve or fringe camp looking for sex with Aboriginal women . . . This ambivalence, the jangling coexistence within the same individuals of aversion and attraction, desire and repulsion, itself constitutes one of the raw nerves of race relations.

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White Closets, Jangling Nerves and the Biopolitics of the Public Secret

Fiona Probyn-Rapsey

Some of the white men in country towns who would specially discriminate against Aborigines by day, under the cover of darkness would slip out to the Aboriginal Reserve or fringe camp looking for sex with Aboriginal women ... This ambivalence, the jangling coexistence within the same individuals of aversion and attraction, desire and repulsion, itself constitutes one of the raw nerves of race relations. (Byrne 185)

[O]ne cannot make full human sense of the development of European life in Australia without reference to the structure of racial relations and the persistent indifference to the fate of Aborigines. (Stanner 118)

This essay attempts to outline the relationship between the 'raw nerves' that Denis Byrne describes in the epigraph above, and the cultivation of 'indifference' that Stanner identifies as being characteristic of 'European life' in Australia. Here I situate indifference as numbing the 'jangling' of 'raw nerves' and as cultivated, disseminated and feeding specific forms of public secrecy. How did the white men who enforced segregation by day and pursued Aboriginal women by night manage their *jangling nerves*, if indeed they did jangle? How did they manage to be seen and known and have their secrets kept for them, as much as by them? How did this contradiction of segregation and sexual intimacy, if indeed it is a contradiction, work? My hope is that if we can understand how the white men (and those around them), regulated these jangling nerves, then we might be able to understand the relationship between indifference, public secrecy and the biopolitical forms that Australian whiteness took in the

twentieth century, and specifically in the period of assimilation, extending from the 1930s to, roughly, the end of the 1960s.¹

The interrelatedness of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families in Australia has been shaped largely as a 'public secret'; 'that which is generally known, but cannot be spoken' (Taussig 50). As Daisy Corunna puts it in Sally Morgan's *My Place*: 'they all pretended they didn't know. Aah, they knew, they knew' (419). While Corunna describes family politics in the 1940s and 50s, the public secrecy of interrelated families is also reflected in public policies of the day (and earlier). Feminist and Indigenous scholars including Hannah Robert, Suzanne Parry, Larissa Behrendt, Ann McGrath, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Ros Kidd, Jackie Huggins, and Anna Haebich have all observed, in different ways, that far from being actively suppressed at a government level, illicit relationships between white men and Aboriginal women were ambivalently endorsed as a part of the policy of biological and cultural assimilation.² Within this policy to 'breed out the colour', white men were positioned as agents of a biopolitics in which whiteness was administered to Aboriginal 'fate' (see also Wolfe), while Aboriginal women were conduits for the reproduction of 'future whites'. A.O. Neville presented the situation of Aboriginal women ('half caste girls') in the following, chilling terms:

Every administration has trouble with half-caste girls. I know of 200 or 300 girls, however, in Western Australia who have gone into domestic service and the majority are doing very well. Our policy is to send them out into the white community, and if a girl comes back pregnant our rule is to keep her for two years. The child is then taken away from the mother and sometimes never sees her again. Thus these children grow up as whites, knowing nothing of their own environment. At the expiration of the period of two years the mother goes back into service so it really does not matter if she has half a dozen children. (Commonwealth 12)

What *mattered*, in Neville's account, was that the children would 'grow up as whites'. Vicki Grieves' analysis of her family history in colonial New South Wales also notes that authorities were well aware of the conditions

1 Anna Haebich writes on the 'retro-assimilation' of the last two decades: 'This paradox of public denial of assimilation and hidden allegiance to its tenets can be explained in terms of retro-assimilation' (*Spinning the Dream* 8). Haebich argues that 'we are vulnerable to the same spin ... [where the] problems of others can slip into the deep recesses of forgetting' (395).

2 The aftermath of this policy of 'breeding out the colour' – to breed out/in and to 'let die' – and its biopolitical resonances are still with us today, including, I would argue, the delayed response to the question of how whites contributed directly to the policy and the role that *whitening* plays within it.

under which 'mixed race' children were born, but that there was little intervention. She argues that 'the lack of concern about the blatant abuse of Aboriginal women in the district indicates that they [the authorities] were anxious to preserve gender relationships that approximated slavery, in line with Aboriginal workers at the time' (128). Aboriginal women's reproductive labour within a pastoral slave economy³ is reflected in Matt Savage's claim that many white station owners were 'breeding their own stockmen' qtd in Willey 54).

The policy of 'breeding out the colour' – which is simultaneously a 'breeding in', a consumption of Aboriginality for whiteness itself (see Probyn-Rapsey) – was building on an already established pattern of what Stanner called 'sexual traffic' between whites and Aborigines from the very beginning of white invasion in 1788. Within the first few months of the colony, Stanner observes that 'a new element appeared: several instances were noted of open fear amongst the women, and of their menfolk refusing to let them go near the colonists' (103) and yet, he adds, the 'documents were curiously silent about the sexual traffic between Europeans and the "sooty sirens", as one appreciative officer called them' (109). This 'curious silence' over sexual traffic, hostile or not, is, Stanner implies, part of that story of the 'great Australian silence', the 'muffled subtext' (Mazzei 355) of which is highlighted in the literary texts discussed here.⁴ This sexual traffic is also part of the story of how European 'life' in Australia comes to own the status of 'life' itself, while Aboriginal people in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are mythologised as a 'doomed' race, dying out, subject to the inevitability of 'fate', necessitating a smoothing of the dying pillow (McGregor); phrases which recast ethnocide and aenocide (Bird Rose 27) into 'evolution' and health care.

The phrase 'smooth the dying pillow' has always struck me as a particularly numbing note in the residual hum of the 'great Australian silence'. Bruce Pascoe takes up this silence in a chapter called 'The Great Australian Face' where he writes:

Their native born Australian sons and daughters soon outstripped the height of their parents and grandparents. The features of their faces were

3 For further discussion of the implications of the pastoral slave economy see Holland; Gray; and Robinson.

4 Literature's capacity to 'close the book' is also noted. A good example that springs to mind is Mrs Aenaeas Gunn's 1909 memoir *We of the Never Never*, a bestseller at the time, originally included the chapter called 'Nigger Hunt', a reprisal for the spearing of cattle. The chapter was renamed 'A Surprise Party' for later editions (see Katherine Ellinghaus for discussion of this). The film version also plays its part in 'disremembering' frontier violence and mythologising pioneer women in its place.

changing too. If you look at pictures of the first squatters and then turn to photos of generations ten, twenty and even 150 years later you see a remarkable transformation. The faces are wider and stronger, the lips and noses fuller and we know from our ancestors that the character became more reticent, stoic and laconic. Sociologists have speculated on the influence of diet and the loneliness and hardships of the bush to explain both appearance and behaviour but the Indigenous influence is always ignored. (116)

Stanner's 'great Australian silence' refers to the way that Aboriginal life, culture and kinship are continually overlooked in the writing of History, in government policy, and in our national monuments and pioneer myths. He argues that this is much more than 'absentmindedness', rather it forms part of our 'cults of disremembering'. He calls it a 'structural matter' like a 'view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape' (189). Where Stanner uses a view from a window as a metaphor for an ethnocentric outlook, one could also think of a 'white closet' to describe this outlook. Rather than blindness, sightlessness or eyelessness, all metaphors that Stanner used to flesh out ethnocentric perspectives, the white closet is not only a place of blindness, it is also a place where white people are *seen* hiding, being watched watching others. White closets are preferable to white blindfolds or black armbands, or 'locked cupboards' (Hartley and McKee) because the closet has a longer association with public secrecy⁵ and illicit sexuality (Sedgwick). Clarence E. Walker's account of the 'heterosexual closet' in his description of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings' relationship is also pertinent. Walker describes the heterosexual closet as 'more than a place of hiding; it refers to a vantage point from which one looks out, watching as well as watched' (109). Ella Simon evokes something similar when she describes her white uncle, who never acknowledged her, but who watched her continually:

I'd nearly always run into this little old fellow buying a paper. He'd always be looking me up and down out of the corner of his eye. I used to wish I could read his thoughts. I mean, was there ever just a little doubt in his mind about the family dismissing me out of hand? Did he ever wonder what I was really like? Did he ever think that my father might not have done something so dreadfully bad in conceiving me as they had made out he had. If he did, he never said a word. I didn't speak to him either. I never gave him a chance. (25)

5 See also Fiona Nicoll's important discussion of public secrecy, particularly regarding Henry Reynolds' 'Why weren't we told?', a question she argues is better posed as 'why didn't we listen?'

Simon poses important questions here about white closets and anxieties about recognition of Aboriginal relations. What *was* going through that uncle's head as he watched his niece so closely and so regularly 'out of the corner of his eye'? If he wanted to ignore her, then why watch her so closely? Was he fascinated by her 'secretly familiar' (Taussig 51) face? Did he perhaps wish to make contact with her but also feared the same racial disowning that had happened to Sam, Ella's white father? In what way does his surveillance of her constitute a 'forgetting' of her? He is *seen* looking but not acknowledging: there is something in that behaviour that I suspect is an important key to understanding the cultivation of indifference as a specific form of public secrecy.

An ambivalent or tacit endorsement of illicit behaviour is expressed as *public* secrecy rather than secrecy. The distinction, as Taussig points out, is that public secrecy is the secret revealed in order that it remain concealed, in order that 'we' know that the knowledge should not be known. The uncle's continual watching of Ella Simon thus constitutes his commitment to the public secrecy of their interrelatedness. Taussig reminds us that 'true secrecy is a virtual impossibility outside of the considerable powers of fantasy' (58), and following this it makes more sense to think of what follows as not an 'unmasking' of the unknown but an examination of the 'secretly familiar' (51). Public secrecy is similar to denial, which Stanley Cohen describes as 'always partial; some information is always registered. This paradox or doubleness – knowing and not-knowing – is the heart of the concept' (22). When it comes to acknowledging historical responsibility, denial and public secrecy are important registers in which knowledge can be brought back into public discourse. Reflecting on the racially segregated town where she grew up in the 1950s, Meaghan Morris argues that when it comes to the removal of Indigenous children by 'the Welfare' it is 'important to clarify that many (I would guess most) white Australians "were not 'aware' of what was happening" *not* because we did not *know* it was happening (we did) but because we were unable or did not care to *understand* what we knew' (107). This clarification is supported by Stanley Cohen's breakdown of denial into specific forms. There is 'literal denial', by which he means a genuine not knowing, then there is 'interpretive denial', which, he writes, 'ranges from the genuine inability to grasp what the facts mean to others, to deeply cynical renamings to avoid moral censure or responsibility', and then there is 'implicatory denial', which include 'banal folk techniques for avoiding

moral or psychological demands, but are invoked with mystifying degrees of sincerity' (9). John Howard's reassurances that Australians should and can feel 'comfortable and relaxed' about our history suit this last category.⁶ Stanner's work on 'disremembering' also adds another element, which is mythologising: 'mythologising and disremembering are part and parcel of each other' (224). A good example of the twin terms of mythologising and disremembering appears as Dupain's 'Sunbaker' (1937), a 'comfortable and relaxed' image enabling the nationalist sentiment that it arouses, the suntanned, white masculine body 'at one with the land', as the National Gallery of Australia's website describes this powerful photograph.⁷ If we think of this famous image as something other than its title, the 'Sunbaker', and think of it otherwise as a *head in the sand*, then we come closer to what Stanner describes. Being 'at one with the land' is only possible, surely, if one's *head is in the sand*, ignoring all other claims to 'oneness' or sharing the country. Here, then, white mythologising, 'oneness' with the land, is part and parcel of disremembering the history of dispossession. Furthermore, that image of the 'Sunbaker' performs a white body made comfortable and relaxed in the blazing hot sun, tanning but not burning: incidentally, the same kind of white skin that Cecil Cook argued could be bred into Australian society via the policy of biological assimilation. In his account, Aboriginality would give more life, literally cancer-resistant skin, to whiteness (see Probyn-Rapsey). That consumption of Aboriginal skin is, in Cook's biopolitics, envisaged as a white man's prerogative, but an eponymous 'white man' without textual flesh.

In 1938, Stanner criticised the policy of assimilation (which was also biological absorption), noting that in the north of Australia 'few people there regret' that 'many of the north Australian tribes are dead', and white society up there is reluctant, even aggressively resistant to giving those they are now supposed to assimilate a fair go (124). On top of this he suggests that the 'Australian point of view' is a 'mass of solid indifference'. Stanner's descriptions of white psychosocial attitudes switch between alluding to 'structures' (as in 'structure of race relations') and also, as in the previous quotation, to something sublime, shapeless, a mass in excess of what is representable. This interplay between structure and formlessness reflects his biopolitical understanding (though he does not use either biopower or biopolitical as terms). Stanner links indifference towards Aboriginal fate

6 Bird Rose also adds that such a 'comfortable and relaxed' attitude of complacency and 'immunity' from responsibility is detectable in the 'she'll be right' catchphrase, the 'maddening little mantra' (34).

7 <http://nga.gov.au/federation/Detail.cfm?WorkID=102513>, accessed 27 Jan. 2011.

to the culture of European 'life' itself: 'one cannot make full human sense of the development of *European life* in Australia without reference to the structure of racial relations and the persistent indifference to the *fate of Aborigines*' (118; emphasis added). Rather than talking about 'Europeans' in terms of national character, he writes of 'life', as if life itself has come to be defined as European. He also refers repeatedly to Aboriginal 'fate', stressing its structural relationship with European 'life': 'there was more than an accidental correspondence between the ruin of Aboriginal, and the making of European, life in Australia. There was, in fact a functional concomitance'. A decade before Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, Stanner's attentiveness to power exercised in and by the cultivation of life itself, and the related cultivation of an Aboriginal 'fate' to 'un-be' (21) – that is, the production of Aboriginality as something that can be let die – deploys the concept of biopolitics in all but name. European life was life made in the service of Europeaness, while remaining indifferent to how exactly that life was made from war, violence, aenocide and the 'policy' of biological absorption.

But what exactly does Stanner's 'persistent indifference' look like? How is it transmitted transgenerationally and how does it come to signal in Stanner's framework a prime feature of 'European life'? Lest indifference be confused with an absence of interest, or simply a 'comfortable and relaxed' attitude, it is worth considering that the 'persistent indifference' that Stanner diagnoses occurs at the same time as war ('silent wars' to use Pascoe's phrase), violence, biological absorption and unparalleled social engineering represented by what we now know as the stolen generations. The sheer scale, the human proportion of the stolen generations, attests to a profoundly active interest in procuring 'life' for Europeaness: 'the destiny of the natives of aboriginal origin, but not of the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth, and it therefore recommends that all efforts be directed to that end' (Commonwealth 3). This was not a 'comfortable and relaxed' attitude towards an historical inevitability, but rather a social intervention on a grand scale to lay claim to 'life' in the form of a 'biologically homogenous national body and mentality' (Anderson 256). Indifference to the 'scale of reproductive intervention that would not usually be countenanced in even poor white Australian communities' (Anderson 228) would also have to be cultivated. Whiteness meant both the biological homogeneity that Anderson describes, but also a blankness in terms of political memory and cultural feeling.

White men like Ella Simon's uncle, seen looking out from the white closet, are of particular interest here because their active silence places

indifference in relationship to this cultivation. His watching her so regularly indicates a motivated interest in her. But they do not speak. What prevents this speech is indicative of what goes into the 'great Australian silence'. Nor does Ella Simon's white father speak. White critics like me are doubly indebted to the life writing of Ella Simon, Myles Lalor, Isabel Flick, and Sally Morgan, who put their observations of whites and whiteness on the public record, for without this, glimpses into the white closet would be near impossible. Their accounts of the white closet are measures of resistance and they also indicate great personal cost. Aboriginal men and women, as Moreton-Robinson notes, 'have no choice but to be conscious of white knowledges and behaviour' (20). White people appear in these narratives as actively interested in cultivating Aboriginal and white silence. Isabel Flick tells the story of her aunt, who, at the age of 13, was told by the boss to go to the stockmen's quarters one night:

She didn't say nothing, because she was a bit frightened. But when she gets down there the stockman was eyeing her off, see. And he's saying: 'They said you was 18'. 'I'm only 13', she said. And he said 'Well, they told me you was 18'. See they must've made arrangements for her to sleep with him.

After Flick's aunt is 'terrified all night', the stockman decides 'Well, you'll just have to sleep there. We'll tell them a story in the morning' (53). What kind of a 'story' was the stockman going to tell? Why didn't he just let her go given that, according to Flick's reading, he 'cared enough not to touch her'? In the morning he tells Flick's aunt, 'Just don't say nothing when you go back up there. You just don't say nothing' (53). It's not entirely clear if the secret the stockman wants kept is his own, or the boss's. Is it more important not to be seen as 'ungrateful' to the boss? Or not to be seen having non-consensual sex with a girl? Is this part of the 'social grease' (Taussig 60) that secrecy supplies? Flick's exposure reveals an attitude towards Aboriginal women and girls as sexual currency between boss and stockman and an attempt to silence the girl and the whole 'event', in which the stockman expresses his allegiance to the public secret of the boss's sexual trafficking: 'Just don't say nothing when you go back up there. You just don't say nothing'. The command to silence is not an expression of indifference, rather it is an expression of the demand to perform indifference that here implicates both the girl and the stockman: 'We'll tell them a story in the morning' (53). Daylight is the occasion for closing the blinds, just as Byrne notes in his description of race relations in the segregated country towns of northern New South Wales.

From the late 1930s, a time when the federal government was pursuing a policy of integration or assimilation, rural towns in New South Wales like Moree, Walgett, Kempsey, Taree and Forster had explicit policies of racial segregation where Aboriginal people were excluded from public spaces like swimming pools, golf clubs, public bars, hotels, shops, cafés and restaurants. This paralleled Jim Crow laws across many of the southern states of the United States and the even more explicit apartheid laws of South Africa after 1948. In Australia, racial segregation is yet another 'public secret', sometimes operating at the level of council by-law and often by way of tacit convention.⁸ This is clear when Isabel Flick describes Crows Corner at Johnson's shop in Walgett: 'everywhere we went we had a special place where everybody had to meet ... People didn't feel so welcome in the rest of the town' (55–56). Denis Byrne points out that often segregation in Australian towns was *not* the subject of explicit council by-laws and that practices of racial segregation were 'something white communities were both hyper-conscious of, but also self-censoring in regard to' (188). This is the case when Flick confronts the racial segregation of the local cinema, where Aboriginal people were supposed to sit in a roped off section down the front. When she confronts the manager he relents, suggesting that he was merely doing what was always done in the cinema, as if segregation were bricked into 'things' rather than the cultural conventions operating them.

Byrne explains that racial segregation operates as a 'cadastral grid' imposed on landscapes, and streetscapes, and that segregation worked to enforce a line between theirs and ours, private and public, and modern and premodern. Aboriginal people found ways to subvert 'that system of spatial control, transgressing its numerous finely drawn boundaries, poaching on its preserves, tweaking the nerves of a spatial system which was inherently tense with racial foreboding, paranoia, longing and deprivation' (170). Byrne points out that these emotional and affective reactions were the result of the failure of the 'settler fantasy' of containment (188). He lists the swimming pool, along with the town common, the river bank, and the picture theatre (188), as spaces of nervousness where 'racial anxiety arguably becomes most intense and acute when the separating space reduces to zero – when black

8 Segregation is not a thing of the past precisely because it works implicitly, not necessarily requiring the recognition afforded by legislation. In 1993 New South Wales Parliamentarian Meredith Burgmann called attention to Aboriginal Liaison Officers being refused entry to the pool at Wilcannia built specially for police officers: 'Which other country town has a special police swimming pool? You've really got to ask why they built the pool in the first place: is it that the police don't want to swim in the same pool as the locals?'

and white bodies actually touch' (170). These 'nervous sites' are akin to Ann Laura Stoler's 'stress points', not 'metonyms for empire writ large' ('Carnal Knowledge' 208) but indications of its opening fractures. In relation to the public secret, these stress points or nervous sites constitute principally a form of regulation, revealing and concealing simultaneously.

One example of this is the Moree Swimming Pool and what is 'revealed' there in the explicit attempts by the council to enforce racial segregation around its use. Bob Brown, who was a member of the local council in Moree, tried to find out just why the councillors sought to ban Aboriginal people from the pool. He was given two reasons. One was a fear of sexually transmitted diseases being spread between Aboriginal and white patrons via the water. The other reason given was that 'You know how Aboriginal men would love to impregnate white women, well they could ejaculate into the pool and this semen swimming around would make the women pregnant' (Perkins 124). Such a comment is almost laughable for its ambivalent projection.⁹ Pat Healy, a member of the Freedom Ride group, noted that it was a real challenge to her to 'stand in front of a group of people who can seriously tell you that black kids should not be allowed to go into a swimming pool because if they ejaculate they might impregnate white girls. How did you answer something like that? It's so mind-bogglingly ignorant and so mind-bogglingly racist' (Curthoys 124). But there is a perverse logic that public secrecy brings to this folk story. Like a kind of transitional object, the swimming pool worked to reveal and conceal simultaneously what the white community did not, by and large, acknowledge. The segregated swimming pool was the 'legitimate' public face of the town's illegitimate and largely denied, gene pool. What was being practised privately (mixing of the gene pool) was being manifestly banned in another (the swimming pool). So the role of the local swimming pool was to act as a 'nervous' site or 'stress point' for the 'public secret' of 'wayward' white paternity. While Ann Curthoys was concerned that the swimming pool represented a 'trivial thing' (Freedom Ride 10) compared to health and educational discrimination, the swimming pool was an important site that, once identified, came to articulate fractures between the public and private dichotomy that secured and destabilised (again 'revealing and

9 Projections and deflections (from white men to Aboriginal men) are observed by Larissa Behrendt in relation to the more recent Northern Territory Intervention. She writes: 'The other issue overlooked in the raft of changes proposed in the intervention is the finding of the *Little Children are Sacred* report that a large number of perpetrators of abuse of Aboriginal children are not Aboriginal. Nothing in the intervention attempts to deal with non-Aboriginal perpetrators, instead seeming to work on the assumption that the problem is entirely one within Aboriginal communities' (Behrendt, 'The Emergency We Had to Have' 17).

concealing') the public secret of white and Aboriginal interrelatedness. The segregated sites did the work of making sure that sexual intimacy did not translate to a shared public sphere; if sexual intimacy risked de-segregation (as relationships formed in love might) they would be re-segregated by divided social spaces.

The racial categorisation of identities also served to further divide social spaces: 'half bloods', mixed bloods, upper class, lower class blacks, and so on, terms reflected in popular and anthropological understandings of identity at the time. Maree Reay and Grace Sitlington's work in Moree (published in 1948) describes a town where 'upper class mixed bloods' discriminate against 'lower class mixed bloods' by reference to dirt and disease (187), and where the former blame other 'mixed bloods' from out of town for 'causing' the 'townspeople to implement a policy of segregation in education and entertainment which did not previously operate here' (183). Reay and Sitlington's attention is on the 'mixed blood' community, which, at the time, would have been considered radical (most anthropologists were more interested in 'tribal' communities). There is little attention paid to the town's white community, apart from the following statement: 'Sexual promiscuity is practically absent in the upper class of mixed-bloods, because they have developed a fairly rigid moral code patterned on that of the white community' (196). It is not clear what the source is for this depiction of the white community's 'fairly rigid moral code' regarding sexual promiscuity. Whatever the case, the rigidity of this moral code flies in the face of what surfaces at the Moree pool. Seventeen years later at the Moree pool Freedom Ride protest, Bob Brown describes opposing sides composed of unacknowledged relatives: 'a huge number of people in Moree are related, they may not be registered down at the registry office ... it was cousins and uncles pitted against their nephews' (Perkins). Nor does the 'fairly rigid moral code' describe the situation at the time down the road in Walgett, when Pat Walford calls out to a white in the opposing crowd: 'What did you say your last name was? ... That's mine too ... you wanna go and ask your father where 'e used to spend his Friday nights, out there at the mission with *my* mother, that's where 'e was.' Reay and Sitlington's 'fairly rigid moral code' of the white community is not supported by Isabel Flick's account of growing up around Collarenebri, nor Ella Simon in Taree, nor Myles Lalor's Uralla (250 kilometres from Moree), where he describes a town suffused with a violent undercurrent of sexual predation. He reports that police officers, store owners, and managers of the stations, would threaten women with child removal, no rations, or expulsion (40–41), unless they agreed to have sex. A very different picture of the white community's sexual politics is

displayed here. I wonder if Reay and Sitlington, two white anthropologists, knew things to be otherwise but did not say, kept secrets and remained silent about the community that they were 'part of' (as whites), and not employed to interrogate. Might they not have intuited, or guessed or sensed that the white community was not all it said it was, or appeared to be? We might be tempted to say today that they failed to ask the right questions of their own people. But this failure is not something unique to them, nor to their discipline, nor to their 'times' either.

Alex Miller's *Journey to the Stone Country* illustrates the contemporary nature of this lack of inquiry within white families – this lack of scrutiny – from one generation to the next. In that novel Annabelle's reaction to hearing Panya's story of the massacre of her family by members of Annabelle's family is significant for its portrait of complicity, and for showing that Annabelle may well have *known* this story, in some way, without acknowledging the full horror, for her whole life: 'Annabelle knew that the truth of Panya's indictment lay behind the decades of her own family's silence' (347). The novel portrays Annabelle's 'knowing' in a way that highlights the difference between knowing and acknowledgement, the difference being, as Cohen outlines, central to the concept of denial as always partial. Hearing Panya's story, Annabelle is physically doubled over with her 'head in her hands' and 'sick in her stomach'. She is also psychologically doubled up, 'afraid and ashamed and angry all at once' (347). Miller depicts Annabelle's 'double wall of denial' (Bar-On qtd in Cohen 125), or the 'mutual interest of parent and child in denying or avoiding knowledge of what the perpetrators did' (125) in the following:

Her grandfather: pastoralist, pioneer, cattleman, Louis Nicholas Beck, eldest son of Nicholas Louis and Marthe Annabelle Beck, from Haddon Hill in the green Vale of Taunton. Had her father known the truth? That gentle, loving man? Had her father secretly known himself to be the son of a murderer and his beloved land the plunder of that crime? She had never thought of herself as the granddaughter of a murderer. The Becks, like all the others, had trusted to their silence about such things in the belief that their crime would eventually be forgotten.

Annabelle herself never asks until the moment when she is forced to consider how it was that her family came to own the vast tract of land that she is 'from':

She thought of all the country town museums she had visited, where there was never any mention of the Murriss. And whenever she asked the attendant why this was so he would tell her with a fatuous sincerity. Why, Miss, didn't you know? There were no Murriss in this part of the country. For it was either tell her that or tell her that her celebrated pioneering

forebears of the district had been murderers and thieves. And that is what they must have been. For in truth there were no other means than murder by which they might have acquired their land. The truth was simple enough, but nearly impossible to deal with. (348–49)

These national commemorations of white settlement pride are props for Stanner's 'cult of disremembering': wilfully ignoring the fact that, in Stanner's words, 'every fence in Australia encloses land that was once the sole or the shared possession of a particular group of Aborigines. There are virtually no exceptions to that statement' (220). Cohen describes this kind of 'simple' truth hidden by a collective lie as 'neither personal nor the result of official instruction' but as related to 'micro-cultures' where 'a group censors itself, learns to keep silent about matters whose open discussion would threaten its self-image' (11). Annabelle's participation in her family's secret, the town's public secret and the nation's, is not a simple matter of her 'lying' to herself. It is related to *learning not to ask*, not to inquire further and not to be in dialogue with Aboriginal women like Panya.

Without public acknowledgment, which is where private knowledge enters into public discourse (Cohen 13), the knowledge of atrocity and brutality can reappear as a sublime haunting, shadowing, ghosts, the stuff of nightmares, both terrifying but also liberating fantasies. Annabelle's fears shift, ominously, from the story – 'She felt she must surely be haunted for the rest of her days by Panya's story' (347) – to Panya herself – 'Old Panya persisting like a nightmare' (348). This shift signals a deflection of attention from the horrors of the story to the storyteller, or from a potential dialogue to a monologue¹⁰ where 'the articulation of injury comes to be represented ... as itself an act of aggression: as if Aboriginal people sought explicitly to destroy White Australians' comfortable attitude towards history' (Bird Rose 23). Annabelle wishes, above all, to reconnect with her lover Bo Rennie and 'reclaim their innocence with each other' (347). This is made possible not by anything that Annabelle says or does (in fact, she remains silent and passive, 'fated' by her perception of 'history' and 'Old Panya'), but by what Bo Rennie says:

'Old Panya's just filled with hatred', he said. 'She can't help herself. You don't want to blame her too much. She never had what Grandma had ... The old people did their fair share of killings too. Them days is over. If we don't live together now we gonna do it all again in years to come. The way

10 Bird Rose argues that monologue is one of two (the other being time) 'powerful forms of closure' that are 'embedded in mainstream contemporary practice surrounding the relationships between past and present'. Both can be seen to 'deflect responsibility for others' (14).

my Grandma seen it, brothers and sisters don't kill each other. And that's the way she lived.' (360)

By moving into the white families that claimed the land, Grandma Rennie pursued a strategy of survival, of entering 'European life'. Grandma Rennie did not pass on that story of the massacre to Bo; her strategy therefore included 'not telling', keeping those family secrets. Grandma Rennie's silence and secrecy are not a matter of indifference, but of trauma and the requirement to live *through* (but not necessarily *as*) 'European life'.

Daisy Corunna, Sally Morgan's grandmother, kept her secrets too, even with the persistence shown by Morgan: 'I've got my secrets, I'll take them to the grave. Some things, I can't talk 'bout. Not even to you, my granddaughter. They for me to know. They not for you or your mother to know' (428). And then 'maybe it's a good thing. Could be it's time to tell. Time to tell what it's been like in this country' (429).¹¹ After the publication of Morgan's *My Place*, there was talk of legal action from the Drake-Brockmans. In her memoir, *Wongi Wongi: To Speak*, Judith Drake-Brockman writes that Morgan 'discredits my family and casts serious aspersions on my father' (138). Those aspersions relate to the implication that Howden Drake-Brockman was both Daisy Corunna's father and the father of her child. Judith Drake-Brockman's memoir tells us, in its last section, that those aspersions 'are easily ignored' (138). All it takes is a ghost at the bed:

One September night in 1988, 5 years after Daisy's death, I heard her crying. I looked up to see her standing by my bed. Between her tears she kept repeating that she didn't say all those things about Mum and all those other things in Sally's book. Her face wasn't moving but I could hear and understand every word she was saying. 'I know you didn't,' I tried to reassure her. 'It's alright, I know.' (139)

Drake-Brockman conjures a ghost by her bed, more than once, to reassure her that she need not be unsettled by *My Place*. Excluding the ghost, Drake-Brockman's other evidence for the lack of truth in Morgan's 'aspersions' include that Howden made 'a very strict ruling against fraternising at Corunna Downs' (9) although 'as Mum said, he could not be all eyes at night and therefore could not see when or by whom those boundaries were broken' (9). Howden's command of the 'strict rules about fraternisation' indicate his

11 In his essay on Sally Morgan's *My Place*, John Docker asks why it is that Morgan's critics accused her of ignoring her white relatives, when in fact it was the critics, Docker says, who ignore just how much Morgan does in fact engage with her own white father. I was also curious that comparatively little critical attention was given to the question of the other white father, Howden Drake-Brockman, as if there were nothing to be learned about whiteness there.

control over both public and private interactions. Carole Pateman argues that this public/private dichotomy is false, that 'the "separate" liberal worlds of private and public life are actually interrelated, connected by a patriarchal structure' (132). For women, whose access to public life is limited by their identification with the private sphere, the separation of these spheres is part of their subordination. According to Pateman, men's mobility within both of these spheres is part of their empowerment: 'Men properly inhabit, and rule within, both spheres' (120). Such mobility is fostered by 'ruling' both spheres and is demonstrated in Byrne's characterisation of white men enforcing segregation by day and pursuing Aboriginal women at night. Seen in the light of the failure of the public/private breach, and the mobility that the control of both allows, the men's actions are not in contradiction but in a relationship of 'functional concomitance', to borrow one of Stanner's phrases. White station owners like Howden Drake-Brockman might have conducted their liaisons not as guilty 'exceptions' within a 'strict ruling about fraternisation' (9), but as part of a *station complex* that gave them power to make those 'rules' in the first place, to be seen as responsible for those rules, to have those rules attached to his public face, and for that to be passed on as family lore, becoming more and more insistent, dependent on ghosts, as inconsistencies appeared.

Arthur Corunna, Daisy's brother, describes the same man, his white father, as having 'shared my Aboriginal father's two wives, Annie and Ginnie' (223). Arthur describes Howden as being caught between recognising his children and seeking white legitimacy as white husband and son of his religious parents, a man who 'owned us, we went by his name, but later, after he married his first wife, Nell, he changed our names' (200). But this did not disrupt the arrangements with Arthur's Aboriginal parents: 'after marrying his first wife, he was still sleeping with Annie' (202). Arthur describes a 'lonely man. I know one night at Ivanhoe, we both got drunk together and he told me all his troubles. He used to go down to Daisy's room at night and talk to her. I can't say no more. You'll have to ask her' (201).

Daisy's account of Gladys's paternity is a reinstatement of public secrecy: 'Everyone knew who the father was, but they all pretended they didn't know. Aah, they knew, they knew' (419). Judith Drake-Brockman recalls that she dreaded telling her mother about *My Place*, but is assured when her mother's response is 'simple', it is "Dais knows" (136). Neither Daisy nor Mrs Drake-Brockman confirms or denies, but each asserts that the other *knows* and that knowing is the benchmark of truth itself. What is 'revealed' here is concealment of truth via an acknowledgment that it

is already 'out there', that someone else already knows (but pretends not to), because in the past they also knew (and pretended not to). Such logic requires that we see the same ghosts; both gesture towards a 'sublime' knowing that transcends, has no need for, indeed avers, dialogue or public acknowledgement. Twelve years after the publication of *My Place*, Morgan revealed 'When I wrote *My Place*, we thought Nan had only one child. We've since found out that she had at least six children, and they were all taken away. We're still tracking some of that stuff. So I think for people like my grandmother, there's nothing that could compensate for that scale of loss' (Interview). Judith Drake-Brockman describes Daisy as someone she knew for 63 years, and with whom she had a 'wonderful, deep and easy friendship' (135).

Putting textual flesh on the white men who segregate by day and pursue Aboriginal women by night *seems* straightforward enough. Perhaps these white men were just good liars, who threatened the women they were with and got away with it by the simple fact that, if challenged, it would be a 'white man's word' against the Aboriginal woman on the fringes. The white men could enforce this state of affairs because in the mid twentieth century that Byrne describes white masculine control of the public/private dichotomy enabled it, and their mobility across both spheres afforded them an unequalled structural advantage to enforce and breach segregation simultaneously. Aboriginal women might be complicit in the secret because such liaisons might afford them some advantage, or they could be silenced by the trauma of violence and coercion and the threat of child removal. Family shame, sexual jealousy and the desire to preserve racial privilege could result in white women disparaging and blaming the Aboriginal woman, with a tidy up of the white closet in the wake of any scandal. One thing is clear, and that is the sheer effort that went into this complicated web of public secrecy about the interrelatedness of Aboriginal and white families; and this cannot be explained by indifference alone. Rather, it is the cultivation of indifference that makes it possible and, by extension, the appropriation of 'life' itself for Europeans, for whiteness.

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